

## THE QURAN AND SUFISM

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The Arabic word *ṣūfī*, from which English “Sufism” is derived, was first used to designate a certain type of religiosity in the second/eighth century. The original meaning of the word seems to have been “someone who wears wool,” though other derivations have also been proposed. Once the word came into use, Muslim scholars never reached any consensus as to what exactly it implied. Down into the seventh/thirteenth century, it was generally used to characterize certain saintly figures and their teachings, and from then on it was also applied to various “orders” (lit. “paths,” *ṭuruq*; sing. *ṭariqah*), within which teachers guided students on the quest for God. Many scores of such orders still flourish in the Islamic world, each of them tracing its lineage back to one or more founding saints and eventually to the Prophet. For centuries, the orders played a dominant role in the religious life of the Muslim community, but more recently the politicized forms of Islam known as “fundamentalism” have to a notable degree obscured their presence, at least to the media.

Modern-day scholars commonly take the word “Sufism” as a synonym for mysticism, spirituality, or esoterism, all of which suggest something of what the word has connoted. For the purposes of this essay, Sufism can best be understood in relation to the structure of the Islamic tradition. The twin foundations of Islam—the Quran and the *Sunnah*—provide guidance on three levels: activity, understanding, and transformation; or practice, thought, and spirituality. As Muslims drew out the implications of God’s Guidance on the level of practice and activity, they gradually brought into being the realm of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the schools of the Revealed Law (the *madhāhib* of the *Shari‘ah*). As they pondered the implications of Divine Guidance for a correct understanding of God, the cosmos (“everything other than God”), and human embodiment, they gave rise to schools of thought like *kalām* (theology) and philosophy. At the same time, many Muslims—often the same figures involved in the first two realms—held that the goal of both right activity and correct understanding was transformation of the soul, that is, achieving inner conformity with *al-Haqq*, “the Real,” the Supreme Truth and Absolute Reality that is God Himself. It is these Muslims who were often called “Sufis” by their contemporaries or by later generations.

The outstanding characteristic of the Sufi approach to the Islamic tradition has been to focus on assimilating the soul to the Divine Word, always on the basis of the



model established by the Prophet. Addressing him, the Quran says, *Truly thou art of an exalted ('azīm) character* (68:4), and it was lost on no one that the Quran uses the same adjective to refer to itself—the *Mighty ('azīm) Quran* (15:87). The exaltedness of the Prophet's character derives precisely from the fact that he had assimilated the Quran into his very being. This is how Sufis have understood the saying of the Prophet's wife 'Ā'ishah, when she was asked about his character after his death. She replied, "Have you not read the Quran? His character was the Quran."<sup>1</sup>

The Quran's role in the soul's transformation is implicit in the accounts of the Prophet's ascent (*mi'rāj*) to God, the "Night Journey," to which reference is made in 17:1: *Glory be to Him Who carried His servant by night. Laylat al-isrā'*, "the Night of the Journey," or *al-mi'rāj*, "the Ascent," was understood as the fulfillment of *laylat al-qadr*, "the Night of Power" (97:1–3). Having brought the Divine Word down to the Prophet on the Night of Power, Gabriel took him up to meet God on the Night of the Journey. He could encounter God precisely because "His character was the Quran," which had descended into his soul and transmuted it into a *luminous lamp* (33:46) in answer to his prayer, "Make me into a light."<sup>2</sup> The Quran itself, after all, is *the light* (64:8), revealed by *the Light of the heavens and the earth* (24:35) to *bring forth mankind out of darkness into light* (14:1).

### The Path of Transformation

Sufi teachers frequently spoke of the goal of the Islamic tradition as "realization" (*taḥqīq*), a word derived from the same root as the Divine Name *al-Haqq*, the Real, the Right, the True, the Appropriate. Grammatically, realization means to actualize truth (*haqq*) and reality (*ḥaqīqah*), and in Sufism it came to designate the end result of following the path to God. To achieve realization means to reach the Real, to see and understand all things in light of the Real, and to act rightly and appropriately in all situations. This demands the transformation of the very being of the seeker, and it is precisely the role of Sufi writings to explain the nature of this transformation, to describe the path that can lead to it, and to offer practical instructions and means on how one can travel on the path.

The notion of "path" is central to Muslim self-understanding. During every cycle of the daily prayers Muslims recite *al-Fātiḥah* (Sūrah 1). After praising God and declaring

1. Aḥmad 10 (no. 25240); Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'jam al-awsaṭ*, ed. Abū Mu'ādh Ṭāriq ibn 'Awaḍ Allāh ibn Muḥammad and Abū'l-Faḍl al-Ḥusaynī, 10 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, 1994), 1:30 (no. 72).

2. The sentence is part of this prayer of the Prophet: "O God, place in my heart a light, in my hearing a light, in my sight a light, on my right hand a light, on my left hand a light, before me a light, behind me a light, above me a light, below me a light, and appoint for me a light" or "make me into a light" (Muslim 7.26, no. 1830).

human neediness, the *sūrah* voices the heart of the religious quest: *Guide us upon the straight path* (1:6). It is this very path (*ṣirāt*) that is embodied as the bridge (*ṣirāt*) over Hell that everyone must attempt to cross on the Day of Resurrection. Those who follow the Divine Guidance in this life will pass over safely, and those who ignore it will fall into the Fire. The Quran makes "guidance" (*hudā*) the general attribute of prophets, and it ascribes "misguidance" (*idlāl*) to Satan. Addressing the Prophet, it says, *Truly thou dost guide unto a straight path* (42:52). But it also reminds us that the Prophet guides only on the basis of God's Guidance, and that God alone is the ultimate Guide: *Surely thou (Muhammad) dost not guide whom thou lovest, but God guides whomsoever He will* (28:56).

Quranic words for "path" or "road" play a prominent role in conceptualizing the tradition. *Sabīl* designates the general path of right guidance, especially in the phrase "the path of God." *Sharī'ah*, "avenue," comes to designate the specific path of right practice codified in Islamic Law and jurisprudence as well as prophetic guidance generally (especially in the plural form, *sharā'i'*, "paths," i.e., "religions"). *Ṭarīqah* comes to mean the path of spiritual discipline, the inner journey toward right understanding and right conformity with the Real that is taught by the Sufi masters (*shaykhs*, *pīrs*); hence its use to denote the Sufi orders.

In summarizing the nature of the path to God, teachers often spoke of "purification of the soul" (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), an expression derived from 91:7–9. Purification demands eliminating blameworthy character traits (*akhlāq dhamimah*) and acquiring praiseworthy character traits (*akhlāq ḥamidah*). *Akhlāq*, or "character traits," is the plural of *khuluq*, "character," and is used to designate the science of ethics (*ilm al-akhlāq*). Among all of God's servants, the one who had the most "exalted character" was Muhammad, literally "the Praised One," also called Aḥmad, "the Most Praiseworthy" (61:6). The Quran speaks of God as "the Praiseworthy" (*al-Ḥamīd*), the implication being that no one else is truly worthy of praise. If the Quran calls the Prophet both "Muḥammad" and "Aḥmad," this is because his character conforms to God's "character," which is to say that "his character was the Quran," God's Speech and Self-Expression.

In short, all those who want to purify their souls must follow the straight path, the path of God. This requires imitating the Prophet on two basic levels: right activity, by following the *Sharī'ah*; and right understanding and realization, by following the *ṭarīqah*. Imitating the Prophet can lead to the recovery of the soul's primordial nature (*fiṭrah*), created in God's "image" or "form" (*ṣūrah*). Hence Sufis commonly spoke of the goal as "coming to be characterized by the character traits of God" (*al-takhlūq bi-akhlāq Allāh*), and they understood that the Prophet's "exalted character" derived precisely from his being characterized by the entire range of Divine Names and Attributes, his full realization of the Reality of the Real. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) devotes a chapter of his commentary on the Divine Names to this process and, following terminology long since used by both Sufis and philosophers, he refers



to the goal as the actualization of one's innate *ta'alluh*, "being like unto Allāh," that is, "deiformity" or "theomorphism."<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Sufis have focused their attention on achieving spiritual transformation helps explain their dedication to what one scholar has called the "Quranization of memory."<sup>4</sup> This meant not only that they, like other Muslims, put great stock in the memorization and recitation of the Quran and invocation of the Divine Names contained in the Quran, but also that they voiced their teachings in Quranic terminology and kept in mind that the purpose of all their efforts was to assimilate the Divine Word. Always the goal was for the soul to be transmuted into the Divine Light, the living reality of God's Self-Expression. This special dedication to the Quran can be observed clearly among the Sufi teachers of the early generations, who are remembered mainly by aphorisms that elucidate the spiritual significance of key Quranic words and phrases. When later Sufis began to write detailed expositions of the human situation vis-à-vis God and the cosmos, they filled their works with commentary on Quranic verses. One of the best examples here is Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), whom the Sufis call "the Greatest Master," because of the unsurpassed detail and profundity with which he explained the nature of the path to God. His monumental *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah* (*The Meccan Openings*) is nothing if not a series of meditations on the Quran and its inner meaning.

In the Sufi reading of the Islamic tradition, every human being is called to undertake the path of spiritual transformation. All have inherited the knowledge of the names that God *taught Adam* (2:31), and all are capable of recovering this primordial, Adamic knowledge by assimilating the Quran. In two verses, the Prophet is instructed to say, *I am only a human being like you* (18:110; 41:6). Like us, he had inherited knowledge of the names from Adam, but unlike us, the verses go on to say, God sent down upon him the revelation of His Unity. It was this event that allowed him to follow the Divine Guidance back to its source and recover the primordial human nature, the *fiṭrah*. As mortals like him, we can follow in his footsteps.

### God's Signs

One might say that the goal of Sufi theoretical teachings is to provide a cosmic anthropology combined with cosmology, that is, an exposition of human nature with respect to God's purpose in creating the universe. Right understanding of human nature must begin at the beginning, which is God, the assertion of whose unity, *tawḥīd*, is the first principle of Islamic faith. *Tawḥīd* is expressed most succinctly by the first

3. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī, *al-Maṣṣad al-asnā* (*The Highest Goal*), ed. Fadlou A. Shehadi (Beirut: Dār El-Machreq, 1971). Part 1, chap. 4 is called "Explaining that the servant's perfection and felicity lies in becoming characterized by the character traits of God." He mentions *ta'alluh* on p. 65.

4. Paul Nwyia, *Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh et la naissance de la confrérie šādīlīte* (Beirut: Dār El-Machreq, 1971), 46.

part of the *shahādah*, "(There is) no god but God," a formula that provides the core of Islamic thought. Its two halves—typically called the negation (*nafy*) and the affirmation (*ithbāt*)—negate Divine Qualities from everything other than God and ascribe all Reality and all Qualities to Him alone.

The dialectic established by this negation and affirmation reverberates throughout the writings of the Sufis and provides the basic standpoint for understanding the Quran's message, which is encapsulated by God's "Most Beautiful Names" (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*). Thus, for example, if God is the Creator (*al-Khāliq*), this means that there is no creator but God. In other words, this Name negates ontological creativity from creatures and affirms that it belongs to God alone. The Quran puts it rhetorically: *Is there a creator other than God?* (35:3). If God is the Strong (*al-Qawī*), then *there is no strength save in God* (18:39). If He is the Rich (*al-Ghanī*), then, *O mankind! You are needful of God; and He is the Self-Sufficient, the Praised* (35:15). If He is the Sovereign (*al-Malik*), then *unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth* (3:189) and *He has no partner in sovereignty* (17:111).

Meditating on God's Quranic Names leads to the understanding that everything in the universe comes from God, returns to God, and is sustained and supported by God at every moment. The universe is in reality a vast panorama of God's "signs" (*āyāt*), a word that the Quran uses to designate the phenomena of the natural realm, the perception and awareness of the soul, the activities and miracles of the prophets, and its own verses. It calls upon people to reflect and meditate on the signs, each of which displays marks and traces of God's Most Beautiful Names. The broad manner in which the Quran speaks of signs/verses leads to a discussion of three books—the cosmos, the human soul, and the Quran itself, the last of which is the key to the interpretation of the first two. As Ibn 'Arabī tells us, all of the cosmos is "letters, words, *sūrah*s, and signs/verses, so it is the Great Quran."<sup>5</sup> His student Šadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274) often elaborates on this imagery. In one passage he explains why the human soul, taught all the names by God, is God's revealed book:

Have you not heard the Words of God? *Read your Book! On this Day, your own soul suffices as a reckoner against you* [17:14]. Whosoever reads this Book has come to know what has been, what is, and what will be. If you cannot read all of your Book, then read of it what you can. Have you not seen how He says, *And within your souls. Do you not then behold?* [51:21] And have you not seen how He says, *We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. Does it not suffice that thy Lord is Witness over all things?* [41:53]. . . . So this, my son, is the Book and the knowledge of the Book. And *you* are the Book, as we said. Your knowledge of your own soul is your knowledge of the Book. And there is not *anything moist*,

5. Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah* (Cairo: n.p., 1911; repr., Beirut: Dār Šādir, 1968), 4:167, l. 22.



which is the visible world, *or dry*, which is the spiritual world and everything beyond, *but that it is inscribed in a clear Book* [6:59], and that is you.<sup>6</sup>

Everything in the universe, the soul, and the Quran is a sign/verse. All signs need to be deciphered through both negation, "no god," and affirmation, "but God." With regard to negation, signs have no reality compared to God's infinite Reality; as for affirmation, each sign points to the Real, for all qualities derive their sustenance from His Qualities. Inasmuch as all things denote God's Names and Attributes, everything in the entire universe is a *tajalli*, a "theophany," a Divine "Self-Disclosure" (*tajalli*). This word is taken from a verse in which Moses asks God to show Himself. God replies that Moses will not be able to see Him. *And when his Lord manifested Himself (tajallā) to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust, and Moses fell down in a swoon* (7:143). The blinding light of theophany negates the mountain and its viewer, just as every sign, seen with the eye of discernment, negates the unreal and affirms that there is nothing real but the Real.

Each of the cosmic signs/verses is a specific thing, event, word, or sentence, but each also points to something else beyond itself. The signs/verses that make up the Quran are also pointers; yet the Quran is *the clear Book* (12:1) and the *clear Quran* (15:1), providing the clarity and insight with which to interpret the signs in the cosmos and the soul. To understand this Divine Guidance, however, people must dedicate themselves to what the Book asks from them, not least following God's path and careful study of His Word. Without understanding the written signs of the Quran, they will never be able to decipher the cosmic and inner signs. They will then be heedless of their own role in creation and unable to deal with the world and themselves appropriately and rightly (*bi'l-haqq*), that is, in conformity with the Reality of the Real.

### The Face of God

The Quran sometimes speaks of God's Self-Disclosure as His "Face" (*wajh*), as in 2:115: *Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God*. In other words, God discloses Himself in everything; so each is a sign affirming God's Reality and negating its own independent reality. At the same time, however, each thing is simply itself; so it is a veil that conceals the Divine Face disclosed within it. A second verse suggests something of the two-sided nature of the Divine Self-Disclosure with its grammatical ambiguity: *All things perish, save His Face* (28:88), a sentence that can equally well be read, "Each thing perishes except its face," that is, the thing's face. If we take the pronoun to mean "His," then the verse affirms the permanence of God and negates the permanence of all things. If we take it to mean "its," then a thing's face, that is, its aspect of relation

6. *Mir'āt al-ārīfīn fī multamas Zayn al-Ābidīn* (*The Mirror of the Gnostics: On the Request of Zayn al-Ābidīn*), in manuscript. A faulty text with translation has been published by S. H. Askari in *Reflection of the Awakened* (London: Zahra Trust, 1983).

to God, is permanent, but not the rest of the thing. Ibn 'Arabī explains that this permanent face of a thing is its inmost reality, which is always gazing upon God, a reality that is ultimately nothing other than the Face of God gazing upon it. He calls this inmost reality God's "Specific Face" (*wajh khāṣṣ*), meaning that God in His infinite Knowledge has an infinity of Faces, each of which is turned toward a specific thing to bring it into existence and sustain it.

The Quran tells us that seekers of God *desire the Face of God* (30:38), and it praises those who turn their faces to Him: *Whosoever submits (islām) his face to God and is virtuous (muhsin) has indeed grasped the most unfailing handhold* (31:22). By submitting their faces to God, seekers find their own true faces, which are the same as the Specific Faces that God has turned toward them. The two faces are ultimately one, for "there is no face but God's Face." Those who seek God's Face, then, are striving to recognize the Face of God that is their own true self.

This quest to recognize God's Face helps explain one of the senses of the famous *ḥadīth*, "He who recognizes himself recognizes his Lord."<sup>7</sup> This *ḥadīth*, which is constantly cited in Sufi texts, is usually translated, "He who knows himself knows his Lord." The verb *'arafa*, however, designates recognition (i.e., re-cognition) rather than simple knowing (which is designated by *'alima*). The use of this specific word suggests that the knowledge gained from coming to know oneself is in fact a renewed knowledge of what one already knows in one's inmost being. Indeed, so important is this notion of "recognition" that Sufism is often called *ma'rifa* or *'irfān*, both of which are verbal nouns from the verb *'arafa*. If scholars usually translate these two words as "gnosis," it is because this English word means immediate knowledge of spiritual truth, and this suggests something of the nature of the self-recognition that is simultaneously God recognition.

It is worth recalling here that the Quranic term *dhikr* denotes both the "reminder" that comes from God and the "remembrance" that is the human response to that reminder. At the same time, the word also means "to mention" or "to invoke," and the Quran frequently encourages mentioning or invoking the Name of God as a means of remembering Him, as in 76:25: *Invoke the Name of thy Lord morning and evening*. This Quranic teaching is the basis for the universal practice of remembering (*dhikr*) God's Name (or "invocation") found in all the Sufi orders. The Quran's use of this word and its cognates shows that, in the Quranic view of things, we already possess the knowledge that we are being reminded of, but we must recover it. In short, true recognition of oneself demands seeing oneself as a Face of God and understanding that "everything is perishing but His Face," which is none other than one's true face.

7. This *ḥadīth* is not found in the standard collections and is rejected by most *Ḥadīth* experts, some of whom ascribe it instead to the Prophet's cousin 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. See Moḥammad ibn al-Munawwar, *Asrār al-tawḥīd fī maqāmāt al-Shaykh Abī Sa'id*, ed. M. R. Shafī'i Kadkanī (Tehran: Āgāh, 1366/1987), 774–75.



The ultimate identity of God's Face and the human face reminds us that our remembrance of God is simultaneously God's remembrance of us: *Remember Me, and I shall remember you* (2:152).

Still another verse that mentions God's Face is the source of one of the most famous conceptual pairs in the Sufi vocabulary, *fanāʾ*, passing away or annihilation, and *baqāʾ*, remaining or subsistence: *All upon it passes away. And there remains the Face of thy Lord, Possessed of Majesty and Bounty* (55:26–27). All signs disappear, but the Divine Face that discloses itself in the signs remains. Sufis take this not only as a statement of the transitory nature of the world, but also as a call to action. Seekers must recognize the passing nature of their own souls save their "faces" and find the permanent Face of the Real; they must negate the veils and affirm the Face, which is to say that they must annihilate their own ignorant and limited selves, so that they can behold the Divine Face.

Human beings, created by God to be His vicegerents (*khalāʾif*; sing. *khalīfah*) on earth (2:30), can play their proper roles only if they recognize who they are and who their Lord is. Adam was taught all the names, but he *forgot* (20:115) and *disobeyed* (20:121). God forgave Adam and appointed him as prophet and vicegerent, but most of his children are dominated by forgetfulness and disobedience. God sends guidance precisely to remind them of their role in creation. When they remember, they will understand that they should be striving to actualize the character traits that are latent in their primordial nature. Veils must be lifted so that the Face of God may appear. Blameworthy character traits must be annihilated, and praiseworthy character traits—the traits instilled in the *fiṭrah*—must become manifested to subsist. Guided by the negation of the veil and the affirmation of the Face, seekers of God aim to follow the Prophet on the ladder of ascent and to recover their own primordial form in the Divine Presence, their own original faces before they were born of their parents. When all ignorance and blameworthy character traits have been annihilated, only God's Face—the magnificent character of the Real—remains.

### Love

Historians have noted that Sufism has had a remarkable ability to appeal to the masses and permeate popular culture. The Sufi reading of the Quran was transmitted through the personal radiance of saintly teachers and a vast literature, much of it presented in the form of poetry and song. Theologians and jurists preferred dry disquisitions in Arabic, the universal language of Muslim scholarship, though they often wrote more popular works in Persian, Turkish, other languages, and even Arabic itself. Poets sang their songs in their own languages, and poetry became a beautiful and accessible vehicle for Sufi teachings. The monumental *Mathnawī* of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (d. 672/1273), for example, has often been called the Quran in the Persian language. This is not because it bears any outward resemblance to the Divine Word, but rather

because Rūmī was able to capture in a nontechnical, everyday language, understandable to any Persian speaker, what he himself calls "the roots of the roots of the roots of the religion"<sup>8</sup>—which is an apt description of the Quran itself, the foundation of everything Islamic.

The basic theme of most popular poetry, especially Sufi poetry, is love, with all of its ups and downs, its joys and sorrows. The contours of Sufism as a cosmic and spiritual anthropology can perhaps best be seen by looking at a few Quranic verses about love and the manner in which these verses were understood. The most commonly cited is no doubt 5:54, *God will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him*, usually in the abbreviated form, *He loves them, and they love Him*. The theologian Aḥmad al-Samʿānī (d. 534/1140) explains that God mentions His Most Beautiful Names in the Quran so as to clarify to His servants that they must negate Divine Attributes from themselves and affirm them for God alone. God speaks of His Exaltation and their abasement, His Knowledge and their ignorance, His Holiness and their taintedness, His Life and their death, His Unity and their multiplicity. But "when He gave news of love, just as He affirmed love for Himself, so also He affirmed love for us—*He loves them, and they love Him*."<sup>9</sup>

Notice that this verse speaks of both God and human beings as lover and beloved. *Tawḥīd* alerts us to the fact that there can be no true lover and no true beloved but God. So in what sense can human beings be called lovers of God, and why should they be the objects of God's Love? We can begin by recalling that the Prophet said, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty."<sup>10</sup> With regard to *tawḥīd*, this means that nothing is truly beautiful but God, and that no one truly loves but God. Nonetheless, God created human beings in a beautiful form: *He formed you and made beautiful your forms* (40:64). Our forms are beautiful because God created us in His own "form," which is to say that He in-formed us with the Most Beautiful Names. God loves beauty; so He loves the beauty of human forms, which is to say that He loves the manifestation of His own Most Beautiful Names in creation.

Why, then, did God create the universe in the first place? In the Quran He says, *I did not create jinn and mankind, save to worship Me* (51:56), the last phrase of which can also mean "to serve Me." Fulfilling the proper human role as God's vicegerent demands serving the Lord, and no service is greater than negating oneself and affirming God, annihilating blameworthy character traits and allowing the Divine character traits to subsist. But what does service/worship have to do with love? Here Sufi texts like to quote the *ḥadīth qudsī*, "I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to

8. Rūmī begins the Arabic introduction to his great work with these words: "This is the book of the *Mathnawī*, and it is the roots of the roots of the roots of the religion, unveiling the mysteries of arrival [at God] and certainty; it is God's greatest jurisprudence (*fiqh Allāh al-akbar*), God's brightest Path (*sharʿ Allāh al-azhar*), and God's most manifest proof (*burhān Allāh al-azhar*)."

9. Quoted in William Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 120.

10. Muslim 2.41 (no. 275).



be recognized; so I created the creatures so that I would be recognized."<sup>11</sup> In other words, God created the universe because, as the verse of mutual love puts it, *He loves them*; that is, He loves human beings; so He gave them the capacity to recognize Him and to love Him in return. By recovering their *fiṭrah*, they recognize themselves as God's servants, and they recognize their Lord as the possessor of the Most Beautiful Names, which are also the Most Lovable Names, for beauty attracts love. Recognition, in other words, turns their love toward God, and love demands devoted service.

So, there is no lover but God, and *He loves them*, that is, human beings created in His "form," for they are the Self-Disclosures of His Most Beautiful Names. And there is no beloved but God, which is to say that human beings love God and God alone, whether they know it or not. This is because no one is beautiful but God; so all love is attracted to His Beauty. Sufi authors are especially fond of explaining this truth, for it goes against common sense, which tells us that we love this person or that thing. Indeed, the Quran remarks, *Made to seem fair unto mankind is the love of passions, among them women, children, heaped-up heaps of gold and silver, horses of mark, cattle, and tillage* (3:14). But why do these things "seem fair"? The reason is that *they love Him* and they see the Beauty of God's Face in His signs without being aware of it. As Rūmī puts it, the objects of love are gold-plated by God's Attributes. People should strive to recognize that it is not these objects per se that they love, but God. Ibn 'Arabī explains the point in this way, referring first to a series of beautiful women celebrated in Arabic poetry:

No one loves anyone but his own Creator, but he is veiled from Him by love for Zaynab, Su'ād, Hind, Laylā, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world. Poets exhaust their words on all these existing things, but they do not know. The gnostics [i.e., those who "recognize" themselves and God] never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about God, hidden beyond the veil of forms.<sup>12</sup>

The significance of the verse of mutual love becomes a bit clearer as soon as we reflect upon what lovers desire. If *He loves them and they love Him*, both God and human beings desire the same thing, which is to be together. To use the technical language of Sufism, they desire union (*wiṣāl*), not separation (*firāq*), for love can never be consummated at a distance. It is equally true, however, that lovers cannot come together unless they are at first apart. It is precisely the desire for union that incited the One Reality to bring about duality and separation in the first place. *His Command when He desires a thing*, says the Quran, *is only to say to it, "Be!" and it is* (36:82). This

11. This saying is much quoted in later texts from around the seventh/thirteenth century on, but most *Ḥadīth* scholars do not consider it authentic.

12. Quoted in Chittick, *Sufism*, 67.

desire to create things is none other than the Hidden Treasure's love to be recognized, for without a separate creation, there would be none to recognize Him and none to love Him.<sup>13</sup>

So the goal of God's creative activity is not, as some might think, for there simply to be a world out there, but rather for God and His loved ones to come together, as they were before creation. Rūmī explains this game of love when he says that all of us used to be fish swimming in the ocean of Divine Unity, unaware of our distinction from the water. Then God threw us up on dry land, the realm of separation, longing, pain, and suffering. Only by tasting separation can we remember the joy of water and desire to return to it. Once we return, we will swim in the Ocean of Unity again with full awareness of the joy of consummated love.

The most explicit reference to union with God in the earliest Islamic sources is probably the sound *ḥadīth qudsī* in which God speaks of the servant who seeks nearness to Him through good works. When the servant advances on the path, then, God says, "I love him, and when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks."<sup>14</sup> This *ḥadīth* has been the subject of endless explication in Sufi texts, for it describes in concrete terms the fruit of *He loves them*. But *they love Him* also plays a basic role: the servants' love for God drives them to follow the path of guidance. If their love were to be misguided, then they would be attracted to the gold plating rather than to God; so they would not advance on the path. To advance they must act beautifully and virtuously (*iḥsān*) and come to be characterized by beautiful character traits. The only way to accomplish this is to follow in the footsteps of the Prophet. The Prophet is instructed, *Say, "If you love God, follow me, and God will love you"* (3:31). When God does love us, then He will be the hearing with which we hear, the eyes with which we see, and the heart with which we love.

"God is beautiful, and He loves beauty." Clearly the Prophet, the last of the prophets and the "most praiseworthy" of God's creatures, is the embodiment of human virtue and beauty. As the *ḥadīth qudsī* puts it, "But for thee [O Muhammad], I would not have created the spheres."<sup>15</sup> God created the universe out of His Love to be recognized, and the Prophet fulfilled this role in the most perfect manner, making him God's foremost beloved and the model that all lovers should follow. By following the Prophet, they can actualize the Most Beautiful Names within their own character, and it is the beauty of the reflection of these Names in human beings that God loves. It is of course also true that God loves all human beings, and indeed

13. In other versions, the *ḥadīth* of the Hidden Treasure reads "I desired" (*aradtu*) instead of "I loved" (*aḥbabtu*). Theologians usually classify "love" as a specific form of "desire."

14. Al-Bukhārī 81.38 (no. 6581).

15. The saying is commonly quoted in Sufi texts, but is not attested in the standard sources. Some *Ḥadīth* works have it in this form: "But for thee, I would not have created the Garden and the Fire." Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī* (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1347/1969), 172.



all creatures. He *made beautiful all that He created* (32:7), and He loves the beautiful. So also the fruit of His "love to be recognized" was the creation of all creatures, not just human beings.

Nonetheless, the Quran never mentions explicitly any creatures other than human beings as the objects of God's Love. Specifically, it says that God loves the beautiful-doers (those who have *ihsān*, in five verses), the God-fearing (three verses), the just (two), the self-purifiers (two), the repentant, the patient, and those who trust in Him. It also says that there are people whom God does *not* love: unbelievers, wrongdoers, workers of corruption, transgressors, and those who are immoderate, proud, and boastful. In other words, the Quran tells us that God has a special love for those who choose to follow His ways, and this love is not exactly the same as the love that brought the universe into existence. The ways of God followed by those whom He loves are encapsulated in the *beautiful example* (33:21) and exalted character of the Prophet.

Explicating the path of becoming adorned by beautiful character traits provides the basis for numerous books by Sufi masters. Probably the most famous of these in the West is *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* (*The Language of the Birds*), by Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. 618/1221), a book-length Persian poem that has been translated into English several times. The title refers to a Quranic verse in which Solomon is said to know *the language of the birds* (27:16). In ʿAṭṭār's reading, the verse is alluding to Solomon's prophetic knowledge of human souls, who alone among all creatures have the potential to fly into God's Presence. Each of the birds in the tale represents a human type with its own strengths and weaknesses. After a great deal of discussion and debate, thirty birds agree to set out on a quest for the Sīmurgh, the fabulous king of the birds who dwells in a faraway country. With much hardship they fly over seven mountains, each higher than the previous one and each representing a stage on the path to God, a character trait that must become a permanent quality of the soul. The seven stages—seeking, love, recognition, independence, unity, bewilderment, and poverty—are based on Quranic terminology and reflect centuries of Sufi teaching and practice aimed at recovering the *fiṭrah* and achieving "deiformity." Reaching the end of the path, the birds find that all of their own character traits have been annihilated and only the traits of the Sīmurgh subsist. The "thirty birds" (*sī murgh*) come to recognize that from the outset, they had been the Self-Disclosure of the Sīmurgh.

Sufi teachers enumerate the stages on the path to God in many different ways, but their common insight is that the Quran and the *Sunnah* provide the guidelines for the realization of the Divine Form that is latent in every soul. Each human being is called to recognize the Hidden Treasure, to recollect the names taught to Adam, to love the true Beloved, and to be embraced by the true Lover. To be fully human demands actualizing and realizing the meaning of *tawḥīd* in the depths of the heart. Rūmī sums up the Quranic path of Sufism:

*Love is that flame which, when it blazes up,  
burns away everything except the Subsistent Beloved.  
It drives home the sword of "no god" in order to slay other than God.  
Look closely—after "no god" what remains?  
There remains "but God," the rest has gone.  
Bravo, O great, idol-burning Love!*<sup>16</sup>

16. *The Mathnawī of Jalālū'ddīn Rūmī*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1925–40), bk. 5, vv. 588–90.